Octavio Paz

The Other Voice

ESSAYS ON MODERN POETRY

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Translated from the Spanish by
Helen Lane

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Introduction

This book is a collection of essays written in the last few years. The subject of all of them is poetry and its place in our day. I began to write poems very early in life, and began very early to reflect as well on the act of writing them. Poetry is an extremely ambiguous occupation: a task and a mystery, a pastime and a sacrament, a métier and a passion. I wrote my first essay in 1941. It was a meditation (perhaps it would be more appropriate, because of its haphazardness, to call it a disorderly digression) on the two extremes of poetic and human experience: solitude, communion. I saw them personified in two poets whom I read with fervor in those days: Quevedo and Saint John of the Cross—in two of their works, *Lágrimas de un penitente** and the *Cántico espiritual*. I later wrote an entire book, *El arco y la lira*,† which was followed by other essays and then, much later, by another book, *Los hijos del limo*‡ In the latter I dealt with modern poetry from Romanticism to Symbolism and the avant-garde movements.

The essays in this volume are a continuation of the final

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*Also called *Heráclito cristiano y segunda harpa a imitación de David* (1613).

†Mexico City, 1956. *The Bow and the Lyre,* trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973).

‡Barcelona, 1974. *Children of the Mire: Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde,* trans. Rachel Phillips (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

part of *Los hijos del limo;* they deal with the twilight of the avant-garde and the place of poetry in the contemporary period. We are not experiencing the end of poetry, as certain people have said, but of a poetic tradition that began with the great Romantics, reached its zenith with the Symbolists, and attained a fascinating twilight with the avant-gardes of our century. Another art is dawning.

The contemporary period has been called "postmodern." An equivocal name. If our era is "postmodern," what will our grandchildren call theirs—postpostmodern? It is generally thought that the entirety of ideas, beliefs, values, and practices that characterize what has been called modernity is today undergoing a radical change. If that is true, this period cannot be defined merely as postmodern. Rather, it is simply what has come after modernity: it is something different, something that already possesses features of its own, though they are still in the process of taking shape. As invariably happens, the break was at first noticed by only a very few; however, shortly after the end of the Second World War it became increasingly more visible. One example among many: revolutionary thought had prophesied a great transformation, inevitable and definitive, in the most advanced countries; in none of them did the prophecy come true. Revolutions took place on the periphery of the Western world, but they became petrified almost immediately, turning into bureaucratic despotisms at once pitiless and inefficient.

We are now witnessing the breakdown of the two ideas that have constituted modernity since its birth: the vision of time as a linear, progressive succession toward a better future, and the notion of change as the best form of time's succession. Both these ideas were conjoined in our conception of history as a march toward progress: societies change continually, sometimes violently, but every change is an advance. Archetypal time ceased to be the past and a chimerical Golden Age; and time outside of time—the eternity of angels and devils, the just and the damned—was dislodged by the cult of progress. The Promised Land was the future. In the sphere of political action, the manifestation of change was the idea of Revolution; in the realm of art and literature, the idea of New Art, based on a break with the immediate past. Today the future has ceased to be a magnet, and the vision of time that sustained and justified it is disappearing. Along with it, the great myth that inspired so many in the twentieth century, Revolution, is disappearing, too. The twilight of Revolution coincides with the twilight of the artistic and poetic avant-gardes. This is no coincidence: modern art came about as a response—both an echo and an answer—to the French Revolution, which ushered in modernity; thus the fate of modern art became one with the idea of Revolution.

The first part of this little book contains three essays. In the first, I discuss the antecedents of the "extensive poem." This is a poetic form that has had great good fortune in the

twentieth century. I do not mean to say that the best modern poems are the long ones. The contrary may be closer to the truth: the intensity of a three- or four-line poem frequently pierces the wall of time. But long poems—those of T. S. Eliot, Saint-John Perse, and Juan Ramón Jiménez, to give three well-known examples—have been an expression of our era and have left their mark on it. The second essay deals with modern poetry and the end of the tradition of the abrupt break. The third is a brief reflection on the ambiguous and almost invariably unfortunate relationships between poetry and the myth of Revolution.

The book's second part examines the function of poetry in present-day society. It concludes with a question: What will be the place of poetry in times to come? More than a description, less than a prophecy, my answer is a profession of faith. These pages are simply a variation—yet another—of that *Defense of Poetry* modern poets have been writing now, tirelessly, for over two centuries.

Mexico City, January 31, 1990

Poetry and Modernity

Telling and Singing
On the Extensive Poem

A living history is sung
by telling its melody.
—Antonio Machado

What is an "extensive poem"? The dictionary says that to extend is to increase something so that it occupies more space. To extend also means to expand, to develop, to enlarge, to unfold, to occupy greater terrain. In its original and primary sense, extension is a spatial concept. Hence an extensive poem is a long poem. Since in language words come one after the other in a row, an extensive poem is one that has many lines and the reading of which takes a considerable amount of time. Space is time. But how long must a poem be to be considered an extensive poem? How many lines?

The *Mahabharata* has more than two hundred thousand

verses, whereas an *uta,* regarded by the Japanese as a long poem, has some thirty or forty verses. Góngora's *Soledades* has just over two thousand verses, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Primero sueño* about a thousand, and the *Divine Comedy* some fifteen thousand. On the other hand, *The Waste Land* has only 434 verses, Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* fewer than three hundred. Long and short are relative, variable terms. The number of verses is not a criterion: a long poem to a Japanese is a short one to a Hindu; a long poem for a twentieth-century reader is a short one to a reader in the Baroque period. Other factors must be taken into account.

Paul Valéry said that a poem is the development of an exclamation. A clear-cut formula, yet one that then requires development. In a short poem, the beginning and the end are fused; there is scarcely any development. In a poem of average length, the beginning and the end are clearly distinguishable, distinct, each possessing its own physiognomy, but at the same time they are inseparable. We read from the first line to the last without isolating the parts. In a long poem, the parts, while not completely autonomous, do exist as parts. We are unable to isolate a part in a poem of average length, because it does not make sense in and of itself; but in an extensive poem, each part has a life of its own. Examples are the Paolo and Francesca episode in Dante's *Inferno,* or the Dante and Matilda episode at the end of his journey through purgatory, or the "Canto on Usury" in Pound's poem.

Poetry is governed by the twofold principle of variety within unity. In the short poem, variety is sacrificed to unity; in the long poem, it attains its fullness of being without destroying unity. Thus in the long poem we find not only extension, which is a relative dimension, but also maximum variety. The extensive poem, moreover, satisfies another twofold requirement, one that is closely related to the rule of variety within unity: repetition and surprise. Repetition is a cardinal principle in poetry. Meter and its accents, rhyme, the epithets in Homer and other poets, phrases and incidents that recur like musical motifs and serve as signs to emphasize continuity. At the other extreme are breaks, changes, inventions—in a word, the unexpected. What we call development is merely the alliance between repetition and surprise, recurrence and invention, continuity and interruption.

Reduced to its simplest and most essential form, the poem is a song. Song is neither discourse nor explanation. In the short poem—*jarcha,* haiku, epigram, *chüeh-chü, copla*—the background and most of the circumstances that are the cause or object of the song are omitted. But in order to *sing* the wrath of Achilles and its consequences, Homer must *tell* the heroic deeds of Achilles, and of the other Achaeans as well, and of the Trojans. Song becomes story, and story in turn becomes song. In its most immediate form, a story is an account of an event, a history. The poem gives us the story of a hero. The extensive poem was

originally an epic poem. But the story of a hero is also the story of gods and the history of the relations between the two worlds, the mortal world and the divine. Ulysses, Ajax, Gilgamesh, Aeneas: encounters, loves, and combat with gods and goddesses. The heroic and the mythical fuse: the subject matter of the epic is the valorous deeds of heroes, and heroes are semidivine beings. Is there such a thing as a purely earthly epic, one uncontaminated by supernatural intervention and divine genealogy? It is said that the *Cantar de mío Cid* is a realistic poem. No. Realism is a modern concept, and the poem of the Cid is a medieval text—that is to say, it belongs to an era in which the interpenetration between the real and the supernatural and wondrous was continual. The epic borders at one extreme on history and at the other on mythology. Epic, mythology, and cosmogony in constant interpenetration. The epic poem is first cousin to the religious poem. The religious poem, in turn, soon transforms into the philosophical poem. Examples abound, from Parmenides to Lucretius.

The Christian West introduces a new and twofold novelty. The extensive poem of Greco-Roman antiquity—whether epic, philosophical, or religious—is always objective, that is, the author does not appear in it. Virgil recounts to us the labors and loves of Aeneas. Parmenides tells us what being is and what nonbeing is. Hesiod tells us of the four ages of the earth. In all these poems, the objec-

tivity of the account is not violated; the subject of the poem is never the poet. But in Christian poetry, a new element makes its appearance: the poet himself as hero. The *Divine Comedy* is a poem in which all previous genres—epic, mythical, philosophical—come together, and a story is told. The subject of the poem is not Ulysses' return to Ithaca or the adventures of Aeneas: it relates the journey of a man to the other world. That man is not a hero, like Gilgamesh, but a sinner—and more significant still, that sinner is the poet himself, Dante the Florentine. The poem of antiquity was impersonal; with Dante, the *I* appears.

A great change: the first-person singular becomes the main character of the extensive poem. This was possible because the *Divine Comedy* is an allegory, and that is the second great novelty of the Christian poem. The story of Gilgamesh's journey to the other world is one of the most beautiful and most heartbreaking texts in world literature—a song of the awareness of death—but at no point can that episode be seen as allegory: the journey of the hero to the land of the immortals, however fantastic it may appear to us, is presented as a real, absolutely real, fact. Nor are the stanzas allegorical in which Homer and Virgil tell us of the meetings of Ulysses and Aeneas with the dead. But Dante's journey to three worlds is three allegories in one: the history of Israel is the key to the history of the human race; the story of the Gospels is the story of the redemption

of mankind; and the story of Dante is the story of all sinners, the story of salvation through love, which is Christianity.

In many passages of the *Vita nuova,* Dante employs expressions such as "Love said to me," "I saw Love approaching." In other words, he sees Love and hears it; he speaks of it as though it were not a passion but a person. Nevertheless, in the same book, commenting on one of his poems, he writes: "There are those who may be surprised that Love speaks not only as though it were a thing in itself, or an intelligent substance, but as though it were a corporeal substance, which is not true. Love does not exist in itself as a substance. It is, rather, an accident of a substance." To understand the sense of this passage, the reader must know that, according to medieval doctrine, there are intelligent and incorporeal substances, like the angels; substances without intelligence, like the material elements; substances animated by an animal or vegetable soul but not possessed of reason; and finally, substances that are corporeal and intelligent, human beings.* Although Love is not an angelic spirit or a demon or brute matter, neither is it a person. What is it, then? It is an accident of a corporeal and intelligent substance; not a person but something that happens to a person—a passion, a feeling. Yet Dante describes this accident, which lacks form though it is born of the

*See André Pézard's note to *Vita nuova* XXV (Paris: Nagel, 1953).